



## Sarkozy's Defence Policy: An Early Look

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**Theme:** The election of Nicolas Sarkozy as the new French President and the potential changes in the French security and defence policy.

**Summary:** As the French prepare for the changes in domestic policy promised by Nicolas Sarkozy, France's allies and the international strategic community are watching for any sign of a repositioning in defence and security matters. On the other side of the Atlantic, expectations are high, but Sarkozy might not be the Atlanticist that some people suppose. Most of the changes are likely to be more of style and personality rather than fundamental shifts in policy. During their first weeks in power, Sarkozy and his new government have focused mainly on European Union (EU) policy and the Middle East. France, for example, has remained surprisingly discreet on the issue of missile defence, perhaps a sign of a more business-like approach and of less grandstanding. One of Sarkozy's priorities will be to reposition his country as a European player. His challenge will be to consolidate a more independent European defence effort, while not distancing France from the US and NATO. The new spirit of renovation might also emerge as a more pragmatic and flexible approach to strategic doctrine and the review of France's White Book on Defence. Sarkozy's emphasis on lifting France's economic performance is also likely to be felt in defence planning and defence economics in general, with a strong support for the industry, as exemplified by the visit to EADS (European Aeronautic Defence and Space) facilities in Toulouse, his first trip inside France as new President. Sarkozy has been rather ambiguous on France's role in stabilisation operations and peacekeeping, an elusiveness he will have to brush away very soon as pressure in Afghanistan is mounting. Finally, one of the new President's most surprising proposals is to create a National Security Council on the US model, which will necessary shake up a long-standing French institutional balance in defence matters.

### Analysis:

#### *The Triangular Game: France-ESDP-NATO*

President Nicolas Sarkozy's agenda is above all a domestic one and French defence policy is not expected to make any major departures under the new leadership. France will remain one of Europe's strongest and most reliable defence contributors. Indeed, most changes are likely to be more of style and personalities rather than substance. Still, Sarkozy has made a number of proposals for France's security policy. Most of them reflect a certain French consensus on defence matters, some are quite orthodox, but there are also innovative ones.

In the evolving triangular game between France, NATO and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), some have seen in Sarkozy a shift towards a more balanced phase<sup>1</sup> of French security policy that would confirm the 'phenomenon of subtle

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<sup>1</sup> Some analysts have identified four consecutive phases in French strategic stance vis-à-vis NATO and

rapprochement between NATO and France, when circumstances and interests converge'. Sarkozy is generally seen as a pro-Atlanticist – '*personne de sérieux ne soutient aujourd'hui que nous pourrions (...) nous passer de l'Alliance Atlantique*' [no one seriously sustains today that we could live without the Atlantic Alliance]– and has stated that the Alliance must remain the '*cadre privilégié*' [the preferential framework] for Europe's strategic partnership and dialogue with the US. However, Sarkozy plays with a typically French conceptual nuance of 'Atlantic Alliance', conceived as a bond beyond and above NATO and the EU. For Sarkozy, the consolidation of the European defence effort must remain the first priority, especially in a strategic context where 'Europe is not anymore at the centre of US preoccupations'. Therefore, France must press harder for an 'autonomous European defence'. In this regard, under Sarkozy –as under his predecessors– Europe will very much continue to be seen as a power multiplier for France's own security policy.

One contribution of Sarkozy to the ESDP debate has been to put the emphasis on self-sufficient territorial and population protection, mainly through political initiatives, like the Mediterranean Union, but also through European defence initiatives. An idea which if pursued would push ESDP beyond the actual focus on overseas crisis management, thus breaking the initial EU-NATO postulate of non-duplication. Still, unlike his very clear and concrete proposals for the EU, delivered in his major European policy speech in Brussels last September, Sarkozy's plans for ESDP generally lack a strong institutional or political substance (except perhaps for the suggestion of a certain degree of reinforced cooperation that would have to include the UK anyway). They mainly revolve around the European defence industry: more pooling of equipment (mainly strategic air-lift), a concerted industrial approach, the development of a dynamic European defence industry base, open support to EADS, flagship projects (eg, space-based surveillance systems and early warning capabilities), etc. Sarkozy has also called for a rebalancing of European defence efforts –'*l'essentiel de l'effort ne peut reposer sur deux ou trois pays*' [the largest part of the effort cannot rest upon two or three countries]– and suggested the establishment of a European defence 'convergence criterion' to strengthen commitment towards the recommended defence spending goal of 2% of Gross Domestic Product.

Sarkozy's Prime Minister, François Fillon, is a defence specialist,<sup>2</sup> who in early March identified five objectives for Europe's defence policy: (1) to expand and coordinate intelligence resources, in particular regarding the fight against terrorism; (2) to improve the operational availability and responsiveness of forces; (3) to increase research and development; (4) to develop a European defence industry strategy; and (5) to build up a common position on missile defence. On this issue, Sarkozy has expressed his 'preoccupation' with the lack of a 'collective positioning of Europeans', which he sees as a 'renunciation of any ambition of European defence policy'. Sarkozy and his entourage have not elaborated much on missile defence. In a recent interview, President Sarkozy made some veiled criticism of Russia's attitude saying the US's proposed third site is perhaps aggressive politically, but not militarily. He also lamented the lack of European accord on the issue. Overall, there seems to be a general consensus in France with the US perception of the threat and preoccupation about ballistic and nuclear proliferation.

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European defence: (1) the promotion of an autonomous European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI); (2) the pursuit of ESDI within NATO structures; (3) the development of ESDP in the EU, while achieving a delicate state of balance and complementarity with NATO; and (4) priority support to ESDP with links to NATO for certain means and missions while transferring NATO's *acquis* to the EU.

<sup>2</sup> He started his political career in 1978, as *chef adjoint du cabinet* of Joël Le Theule, a Minister of Defence with Giscard. He was also a member of the cabinet of François Léotard in 1993. Between 1986 and 1988 he was the chairman of the Defence Commission at the Assemblée nationale and has been in charge of defence matters at the RPR (Rassemblement pour la République, Gaullist right). In the first Raffarin government in 2002 he competed against Michèle Alliot-Marie for the defence portfolio, but had to give up as Michèle Alliot-Marie had demanded a '*ministère régalien*' and Chirac wanted 'some sort of left-wing Gaullist' for the sensitive Ministry of Social Affairs.

Notwithstanding a serious concern about a politically divisive –but crucial– security issue, France's position on missile defence will likely be influenced by difficult choices about defence resources and priorities, the effectiveness of missile defence vs. traditional nuclear deterrence, and the promotion of French industrial interests.

As regards NATO, Sarkozy has repeatedly stated that European defence and NATO are more complementary than replaceable (*'sont plus complémentaires que substituables'*), so complementarity between both organisations would be the new *maître mot*, a new realism as opposed to the utopianism of previous years. On NATO's evolution, Sarkozy said it had become an 'efficient military organisation', but one that lacks a project. He warned against NATO becoming a global organisation 'on the fringes of military, humanitarian and police activities'. Repeating a traditional French mantra, for Sarkozy, NATO must remain a 'defence organisation of a military nature', centred on Europe's security and which must not pretend to compete with the United Nations: *'une organisation de défense sans ancrage géopolitique n'a pas de sens, et n'a donc pas d'avenir'* and *'l'OTAN ne doit pas se disperser et être dénaturée'* [a defence organisation without geopolitical anchorage has no sense and therefore has no future; NATO must not be dispersed and denatured]. Finally, building up on Berlin Plus, the EU must be able to continue to rely on NATO's assets and capabilities, including planning and command and control. However, Sarkozy's firm and probably insurmountable position on Turkey will certainly complicate this and will generally not facilitate a rapprochement between NATO and the EU and might complicate the cooperation between the two organisations on upcoming operational challenges in Kosovo or Afghanistan.

In a speech at the *Journée de la Défense* of the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, centre-right), on 7 March, Sarkozy said NATO's military nature, European focus and support to ESDP were 'the three conditions for the maintenance at its current level of the important contribution of our country to NATO'. More specifically, in what could be an attempt to positively revive Chirac's failed 1997 proposal on the integrated command structure, Sarkozy has hinted at a possible review of the modalities of France's participation in NATO, saying that France should adapt its rhetoric to reality if it really wants to influence NATO's evolution. He also called for a 'more autonomous role' of European nations within NATO and for a certain degree of pre-coordination of positions among the main six EU defence contributors (UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Poland) before deciding on joint initiatives with the US.

#### *White Book on Defence*

The fundamental orientations of France's defence policy are based on the conclusions of the White Book on Defence, which dates back to 1994. Sarkozy has elaborated at some length on the need to review and update France's defence objectives and priorities and called for a fundamental debate on the 're-evaluation of the strategic framework of defence policy'. This should follow a double perspective: an objective evaluation of the international and strategic environment, assessing the threats and challenges; and a more subjective review, based on 'political voluntarism', that should answer a number of questions about France's priorities, its foreign policy goals, its level of ambition, what the country can realistically achieve on its own and 'what it needs and wants to share with allies', what operational engagements, and which hierarchy of military capabilities.

Sarkozy said this 're-evaluation exercise' should start immediately after the presidential elections. He warned against long debates that would result in a rigid strategic doctrine. The strategic environment, he argued, is unstable and fluid and therefore requires a more regular adjustment of French strategic thinking. The preparation of a new White Book should be 'de-dramatised' and become a 'more routine' and operationally-oriented exercise. The new White Book should form the basis of the 2009-13 spending plan and lead to a review of France's Armed Forces Model for 2015. Its main conclusions should

therefore be defined early and certainly by the beginning of 2008. One can speculate on a more pragmatic and flexible approach to France's strategic doctrine. Interestingly enough, in this connection, François Fillon suggested the drafting of a 'European White Book' that should take into account EU enlargement issues, new threats and the 'almost total disappearance of US troops from European soil'.

#### *Transformation, Defence Planning and Financing*

The current *Loi de Programmation Militaire 2003-2008* (LPM), which was released in September 2002, already inspired a deep re-think of France's overall defence effort. For the fourth year running, France has kept steadily to its ambitious defence spending and its transformation programme, reflecting the policy goals of acquiring a wider range of equipment and the modernisation of its nuclear deterrent. This will in principle keep France firmly on track to meet the objectives of the Armed Forces Model for 2015. A main task of the new defence team will be to begin work on the next five-year defence spending plan for 2009-13. The new LPM should continue to provide financial and political guarantees to further modernisation. Sarkozy has argued that, given the present security environment and likely military commitments, it would be unwise to reduce spending in the next LPM. He would see to it that the defence budget 'is maintained at least at its current level' –2% of GDP being '*le seuil incompressible*' [bare minimum]–. Still, given that the 2003-08 plan has so far been fully implemented, thus significantly boosting the budget, it seems unlikely that the government will be as generous over the next five years. In this regard, Sarkozy has vehemently insisted on the need to improve budget performance, increase efficiency margins and achieve better value for money, and promised that savings would be reinvested in the defence effort.

For Sarkozy, the defence budget should not become an 'adjustment variable' for public finances. In contrast to Jospin's 'dilapidation' years, he praised Michèle Alliot-Marie's '*redressement salutaire*' [healthy recovery] after 2002, which will allow to build on solid ground. The economic efficiency of defence expenditure is an important issue for Sarkozy. For him defence costs are 'productive spending' in a sector that employs more than 180.000 workers in France and contributes substantially to research and development. Actually, most of his interventions on defence matters have focused on defence economics rather than on strategy or the security environment, in line with his national reform programme: '*Le projet qui est le mien pour la Défense n'est donc pas dissociable du projet d'ensemble que je propose aux Français*' [My own project on defence cannot be dissociated from the general project I propose to the French people]. Sarkozy is generally considered to have more free-market impulses than his predecessors, so provided he fights back interventionist inclinations and jettisons the French protectionist model, he is likely to have a more liberal and pragmatic approach to defence economics. A sign of what might be coming are Sarkozy's references to outsourcing a number of support functions 'disconnected from operational activity', to civilianise administrative positions and, more importantly, 'to adopt innovative modes of financing', such as private-public partnerships. Sarkozy's stated intention to break the mould of some long-standing French defence sector traditions and his constant references to the UK model might augur new approaches to issues like outsourcing, financing and procurement.

One of Sarkozy's priorities will be to carry out a thorough review of current programmes before work on the next LPM begins later this year. He suggested a 'hierarchy of priorities' for flagship projects and said he will give special attention to programmes that reinforce France's projection capabilities.<sup>3</sup> However, it is commonly agreed that expenditure on a

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<sup>3</sup> Specifically mentioned were SCALP cruise missiles for the navy, new 'Barracuda' nuclear submarines, strategic air and sea transport and –breaking a long silence on the issue– the go-ahead for a second aircraft carrier, in order 'to guarantee the permanent presence at sea of our carrier strike group, our operational

number of big-ticket items in the current medium-term defence blueprint will telescope in the coming years, which might push spending far above available allocations. France will have to stretch out some programmes and cut back others, particularly ambitious plans to boost the military space programme and remedy capability gaps in unmanned aerial vehicles and transport/refuelling aircraft. This upcoming budget crunch might influence programmatic decisions, as France might decide to cut back in some areas, or go for more multilateral solutions within NATO or the EU. A logical consequence of this would be more EU-NATO technical cooperation on capability development, but whether France will encourage that is another question.

### *Expeditionary Operations*

Throughout the election campaign Sarkozy adopted a somewhat ambiguous stance towards expeditionary operations. On the one hand he argued that French forces must be carefully marshalled and not overextended and suggested a re-examination of the conditions for engaging troops abroad. Sarkozy said the French army 'is not an expeditionary corps that is supposed to play the role of firemen and gendarmes in the four corners of the world' and has called for a general debate that should contemplate issues such as the pre-deployment of troops, identifying priority areas for deployment, mandates, rules of engagement and financing. His contradictory statements on Afghanistan – expressing 'regret' at Chirac's removal of French special forces from the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, but then hinting at a possible future withdrawal from NATO-led International Security Assistance Force<sup>4</sup> is an example of this calculated ambiguity. Despite this, and against the background of ISAF planning for troop rotations in 2008-09, it is likely that in the coming months France will initiate discussions with Washington to clarify strategies in Afghanistan.

Sarkozy said he would accelerate efforts undertaken over the last 10 years to develop power projection and deep strike capabilities. His objective will be to finalise the evolution towards a 'usable force' capable of ensuring an appropriate forward defence. He acknowledged that in times of globalisation and proliferation, territorial security can be challenged outside French territory. Hence the need for forces able to quickly respond to threats far away from France. Sarkozy has put particular emphasis on the protection of troops in theatre, which should be 'systematically reinforced', especially in the case of ground forces deployed in hostile urban areas. He has gone into some detail on specific programmes: NRBC (nuclear, radiological, biological, chemical) protection, digitisation of the battlefield, individual equipments, vehicle armour, combat medicine, air mobility, etc.

In what could be a sign of a re-evaluation of France's military engagement in Africa, Sarkozy has linked the presence of the almost 4.000 French troops in the Ivory Coast to security requirements in view of upcoming elections in that country. He said he would not allow French troops to become 'bogged down' in such operations and stated that France has no vocation to sustain fragile regimes in its former colonies.

### *'Domaine Réservé', Institutions and Civil Society*

In line with a growing European trend, but marking a clear break with French presidential prerogatives in defence matters ('*domaine réservé*'), Sarkozy said he wanted 'stronger involvement' by Parliament in defence policy: '*Dans une démocratie moderne, il ne saurait y avoir de domaines réservés, à plus forte raison quand les domaines réservés touchent à l'essentiel*' [In a modern democracy, there should be no private preserve, all the more reason because private preserves affect what is of the essence]. Devolved powers could relate to the control of intelligence services, the authorization of the 'presence and

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independence and our freedom of action'.

<sup>4</sup> On 26 April, during a TV interview, Sarkozy said '*la présence à long terme des troupes françaises*' [the long-term presence of French troops] in Afghanistan was not '*décisive*'.

modalities of troop deployments abroad, after a certain time limit', the approval of major arms programmes (based on Britain's National Audit Office model), and the ratification of defence agreements.

Despite all this –and the promised regular visit of the President to Parliament to present and explain his defence policy– it is unlikely that the head of state's private preserve in defence matters will be fundamentally altered. One of Sarkozy's proposals that will actually reinforce presidential powers is the setting up of a *Conseil de sécurité nationale*, a national security council, which should become 'the central body for analysis, debate and thinking in security and defence matters, in normal circumstances and during crises'. Indeed, a 'comprehensive approach to security challenges' calls for a body that encompasses homeland security, foreign policy and civil and military defence. This new National Security Council will have different configurations depending on the issues and circumstances debated and will replace the existing Internal Security Council and Defence Council. It will also coordinate intelligence services, a function carried out until now by the Secrétariat Général de la Défense. Sarkozy's stated intention is not to create a 'chamber that would endorse the verdict reached by a restricted circle', but rather a forum for contradictory debate among senior governmental experts to support the president's decision-making.

One interesting issue that has received little media attention, but that surfaced during the election campaign is the link between Armed Forces and society ('*Armées-Nation*'), as a sign of an emerging debate, not only in France, but elsewhere in Europe, on the relation between the provision of security and its cost. It is about the perception of a growing gap between society and the men and women that act on its behalf in operational theatres. In France, this is partly the result of the professionalisation of the military, dubbed the 'second military revolution' of the Fifth Republic (the first was the unification of the three services into a single Ministry of Defence in 1962). It also has a wider dimension that reflects a growing concern about the emergence of what Lindley-French has described as 'military ghettos across the West full of soldiers and their families (...) detached from a society that understands little of what they do and cares even less'. In this regard, Sarkozy has stated that the integration of the military in French civil society is a major challenge –'*nous devons être attentifs à ce qu'ils ne décrochent pas du reste de la société*' [we must ensure that they are not left behind the rest of society]–.

**Conclusions:** France has been in election mood for quite some time now. Following the legislative elections of 10 and 17 June, the dust should start settling and more signs of France's viewpoint on a number of defence matters should become clearer. However, a big bang is unlikely. If anything, change will be an evolutionary process. The French strategic community has embarked on preparations for a new White Book on Defence to be finalised sometime before the end of 2007. As the basic strategic orientations of France's defence policy are redefined, it is abundantly clear that Europe and ESDP will remain at the heart of France's strategic thinking. France is indeed 'back in Europe' and that should also include ESDP. But the question is how much capital and effort will Sarkozy want to invest in strengthening ESDP and whether he will find the European partners to do so, starting with the UK. Following the 1997 US rebuff to France over its demands for a larger European role in the Alliance, Jacques Chirac championed an autonomous European defence and succeeded in convincing the British to support it, at a significant summit in Saint Malo in 1998. For Sarkozy, it will be a tough job to outdo his predecessor's support for ESDP. One key issue will be his position on the development of a European operational planning capability independent from NATO.

One area where Sarkozy will certainly do better is relations with the US. In his victory speech Sarkozy appealed 'to our American friends' and said the US 'can count on our friendship, which has been forged in the tragedies of history which we have faced

together'. How this new attitude will further materialise remains to be seen, especially as Europeans are increasingly looking towards 2009 and a new US administration. One possible early sign of this diplomatic thaw could be France's rather conciliatory position on missile defence. Washington has great expectations and the centre of gravity in the transatlantic relationship has visibly moved closer to Paris. Still, the risk is that the US expects too much, too soon. Sarkozy has stated that 'friends may think differently' and his agenda is above all a domestic one, so significant defence policy choices might take some more time. One crucial decision will be Afghanistan, as the Alliance is facing major troop rotations in 2008-09.

Sarkozy generally speaks his mind in a clear way and his proposed institutional changes in the defence policy area should also increase transparency and normalcy in the way decisions are taken and implemented. The enhanced role of the *Assemblée Nationale* in security matters was meant to introduce an element of checks and balances in what is a very presidential-centred political system. Now, this might be somewhat upset by the results of the legislative elections, which gave the ruling UMP an overpowering presence in parliament. As regards France's ambivalent relationship with NATO, it would not be too far fetched to anticipate some changes that might improve the quality of France's interaction with allies. France will likely want to exert more political influence in the Alliance and make its presence felt in a more creative and constructive manner. But that will not necessarily match the wishes of some of its Allies. There will be ample opportunity to test France's willingness to change in the run up to the NATO summit in 2009 –marking the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Alliance–, which will take place after the US elections and is therefore already seen by many as a 'healing summit'. The question is whether Sarkozy will finally overcome what François Heisbourg called the 'strategic ambiguity' by which France would be gaining time in NATO while the ESDP process gradually evolves through institutional incrementalism rather than by following an overall grand design.

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